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Viewing cable 06DAMASCUS5349, SARG FEELING CONFIDENT IS THE MESSAGE TO STAFFDEL

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

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If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06DAMASCUS5349**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06DAMASCUS5349	2006-12-03 07:37	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2535
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 005349

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NEA/ELA; NSC FOR MARCHESE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG FEELING CONFIDENT IS THE MESSAGE TO STAFFDEL
TALWAR

Classified By: Classified by Charge D'Affairs Michael Corbin
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Puneet Talwar, held meetings in Damascus November 22 with an opposition member, informal SARG advisor, journalist, and others. The common perspective from the meetings is that the SARG feels it is operating from a position of strength and is willing to be helpful on Iraq, but continues to focus on maintaining the stability of the regime. It is also focused on events in Lebanon and has become alarmed about the formation of the international tribunal to investigate the murder of former PM Hariri. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PROSPECTS FOR THE OPPOSITION IN SYRIA: Opposition leader XXXXXXXXXXXX said that the SARG feels it has prevailed after a difficult period and that time has vindicated its confrontational policies, as evidenced by recent EU re-engagement. He said the opposition elements are concerned that the West, in this new environment, will forget about their efforts to build democracy in Syria, although he reported that he had been told that the EU did commit to imposing human rights conditions on their engagement with Syria. He asked that the United States make a similar commitment if it proceeded towards engagement, asserting that without international scrutiny the SARG would crush the opposition. He argued that while the regime maintains a few reform figures, like Abdullah al-Dardari, for public consumption, the regime is not capable of real reform. XXXXXXXXXXXX asserted that the regime has developed a powerful rhetoric of fear to deflect internal pressures, which leaves average Syrians feeling they must either support the regime or face Islamic extremists and Iraq-style instability and violence.

¶3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said that despite regime pressure the opposition has managed over the last four months to strengthen the organization of the Damascus Declaration (DD) group. He says the group, formed after the Damascus Declaration of 16 October 2005, brings together credible leaders from across Syria, and is composed of diverse groups, including communists, Arab nationalists, liberals, Kurds, and the

Muslim Brotherhood (MB). He says that despite regime efforts to sow discord between the groups, they are now working together towards a common democratic goal and have supporters both in Europe and, to a lesser degree, in the United States.

¶4. (C) Regarding Abdul-Halim Khaddam, XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the former regime figure is a real thorn in the side of the Bashar al-Asad regime, especially because he has the ability to speak knowledgeably about inner-circle corruption and to appeal to some Sunnis. However, Khaddam is fatally tainted by his own corruption and his long-term association with the regime of Hafez al-Asad. As such, Khaddam is not acceptable to the DD group as a figure with whom they are willing to cooperate, although the DD group does not publicly criticize his National Salvation Front, wishes him well in his efforts to damage the regime, and thinks the two can work in parallel. The group has decided to continue partnering with the MB, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX.

¶5. (C) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSISTING DEMOCRACY IN SYRIA: XXXXXXXXXXXX said that because the United States has lost credibility in the region, most recently because of its veto of the resolution on Beit Hannoun in the Security Council, the U.S. needs to partner with Europe on democracy and human rights issues. He encouraged the U.S. to exploit weaknesses in the regime's propaganda, including:

--finding a fair solution in Palestine to undercut Asad's rhetoric as defender of the Palestinian people;

--exposing the corruption of regime supporters who claim to be high-minded, virtuous supporters of Islam; and,

--identifying regime members as perpetrators of the assassinations in Lebanon.

He also suggested that the United States encourage the Saudis to allow Saudi-owned media such as Al-Hayat or Al-Arabiya to publish negative articles about Asad and positive articles about Muslim life in the United States. He further suggested that the U.S. press the Saudis to give Khaddam much greater access to their influential regional media. He expressed doubt that a statement on human rights released by the United States would be useful at the present time.

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¶6. (C) PRO-REGIME ANALYST ASSERTS SYRIA'S KEY ROLE IN THE REGION: XXXXXXXXXXXX, a pro-regime foreign policy analyst, said time has proven Syria plays a key role in the region and that the SARG cannot be overthrown by a coup d'etat. He asserted that the SARG is ready to cooperate with the United States if it accepts Syria as a partner with common interests in obtaining peace in the Middle East. XXXXXXXXXXXX argued that the United States needs the rationality of the secular-oriented Asad regime to counter ideological extremists in the area, noting SARG efforts to arrest Al-Qaeda members in Syria. He also claimed that Syria is not in the pocket of Iran, but merely using the relationship to pragmatically guarantee Syria's interests.

¶7. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX briefly outlined Syria's goals in the region. He claimed that although the SARG is willing to compromise in Lebanon, it does not want an anti-Syrian Lebanese government and feels attacked by the recent acceleration of the international tribunal formation. He also noted that while "Syria is currently the lung of Hizballah" and intensely concerned about developments there, the SARG will not need to be so involved in Lebanon once it gets back the Golan and is assured through a revitalized peace process that Israel will not seek to use Lebanese territory for invasion routes into Syria. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that towards this end Syria wants to re-start the larger peace process and that it has not been responsible for blocking the unity government in Palestine. Regarding Iraq, XXXXXXXXXXXX said Syria is concerned about the violence and is willing to work with the United States,

although he did not offer many specifics.

¶8. (C) SARG FEELINGS OF VICTORY: XXXXXXXXXXXXX asserted that the Syrian regime's position had changed over the last year, from extreme insecurity and fears of regime change after the Hariri assassination, to a growing confidence that has turned into surging feelings of SARG confidence, especially following the Hizballah-Israel war in Lebanon. XXXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that President Asad no longer cares as much about his image as a reformer that was publicized at the beginning of his Presidency, instead shoring up his legitimacy with his assiduous efforts to support the resistance in Palestine and Lebanon. He says this shift has empowered Asad and that his more confrontational posture and his anti-Israeli, anti-American, pro-Hizballah rhetoric have greatly increased his popularity and standing with the Syrian public XXXXXXXXXXXXX asserted that the regime was not overly concerned about bilateral tensions with Saudi Arabia or Egypt, noting relations with Egypt are already on the mend, and that relations with Saudi Arabia would necessarily improve over time as the Saudis inevitably realize that Syria had an indispensable role to play in Lebanon and Iraq.

¶9. (C) GOOD COP, BAD COP: XXXXXXXXXXXXX suggested that recently President Asad is using Vice-President al-Shara'a to play the "bad cop" and FM Mu'allim to serve as the "good cop" in international politics, and asserted that since meeting with Baker in September Mu'allim has enhanced his status inside the regime. XXXXXXXXXXXXX commented that Mu'allim pushes for engagement with the U.S. to achieve a settlement in the Golan, asserts Syria needs Europe for economic profit, and speaks of Syria as a constructive player in the resolution of regional problems, while Shara'a tends to deny Syria's need to make concessions on any of these fronts, believing it is in a position of strength and benefits from its current posture of confrontation and delay. XXXXXXXXXXXXX argued that by isolating Syria the United States has inadvertently strengthened Shara'a and the hardliners, and through engagement would strengthen the moderates.

¶10. (C) MU'ALLIM'S TRIP TO IRAQ: XXXXXXXXXXXXX stated that from a Syrian perspective Mu'allim's trip to Iraq has three significant components: it's the first time in 25 years that a high ranking Syrian official had gone to Iraq; the trip signified the resumption of diplomatic ties between the two countries; and this was the first time a "senior-level" Arab official stayed for a three-day visit in Iraq. He asserted that Mu'allim would not attend a summit in Iran because the purpose of the trip to Iraq was to strengthen Syria's "Arab hand," not the Iranian hand, and that traveling to Iran would undercut the international goodwill that may have been generated by Syria engaging with Iraq. While XXXXXXXXXXXXX thought Syria was more willing to be helpful in Iraq than Lebanon, he asserted that Syria's capacity for influence in Iraq was weaker than commonly believed among Shiites and Kurds, and only moderately useful among Baathist elements in the Sunni

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camp.

¶11. (C) Staffdel Talwar cleared this cable.

CORBIN